

I. OUTDOOR RECREATION ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

As North Carolina moves into the 21st century, its growing and changing population will be making increased demands for additional outdoor recreational services. The landscape will become more and more developed as urban areas expand to threaten or surround natural areas and open space.

The major park and recreation issues to be addressed over the next five years can be grouped into three categories:

1. Conservation of Natural Resources — The need to conserve and protect important natural resources and open spaces in a rapidly developing state.
2. Improved Outdoor Recreation Resources And Services – The need to foster public health and fitness through improved outdoor recreation resources and services.
3. Enhance Quality of Life and Economic Growth – The need to improve quality of life and economic growth through land and water conservation.

The issues were developed through the work of the Joint Legislative Commission on Land and Water Conservation. The commission conducted three public meetings across the state, attended by over 750 people. These findings were identified within the report of the commission.

Issue: Conserving Natural Resources

As the population of North Carolina increases, so does the need to identify and conserve the most important natural lands and clean waters. While these needs have been brought into sharp focus in the past decade, the issue has long been a priority in the state. For nearly 40 years, Article XIV, Section 5 of the North Carolina Constitution has established overall policy by broadly defining the conservation and protection of natural resources and the acquisition of such resources as a proper function of government. The amendment reads in part as follows:

It shall be the policy of this State to conserve and protect its lands and waters for the benefit of all its citizenry, and to this end it shall be a proper function of the State of North Carolina and its political subdivision to acquire and preserve park, recreation, and scenic areas.....

In addition, the State Parks Act sets forth natural resource conservation as central to the mission for the state parks system. It states that the system functions to preserve and manage representative examples of significant biologic, geologic, scenic, archaeologic, and recreational resources, and that park lands are to be used by the people of the state and their visitors and descendants in order to promote understanding of and pride in the state's natural heritage.

The urgency to address the effects of increased urbanization and conversion of natural lands into man-made development is felt by a large majority of North Carolinians. New residential and commercial construction has changed the character of the landscape from secluded mountain coves to coastal communities that have supported generations of fishermen. These changes are reflected in the attitudes of citizens who have experienced the changes in these rural areas during their lifetime.

**Attitudes About Public Land Management
For North Carolina and Surrounding States**
(Percent saying important or very important)

Activity	Region	United States
Conserve and protect natural resources, especially water	91.0	91.5
Develop volunteer programs to improve natural resources	90.2	88.2
Inform public on environmental impacts of uses	85.6	79.4
Inform public about recreational concerns	85.2	85.5
Protect ecosystems & wildlife habitats	81.2	81.3

Source: National Survey on Recreation and the Environment

Beginning in 2005, The Nature Conservancy prepared a five-year plan for conserving land in North Carolina that assessed the need for increased action in the face of a rapidly changing landscape. The effort helped focus attention on the benefits of conservation as well as the increased urgency for protecting public and private undeveloped areas such as parks, forests, rivers, and farms. The plan also proposed significant new funding to help address these needs through increased funding for the state's four conservation trust funds.

The recommendations were the result of a statewide effort to publicize and build support that included a series for statewide meetings and an outreach effort to identify communities, agencies and organizations that would support increased funding for land

conservation. Over 250 of these organizations signed on as supporters; a further testament to the high priority that North Carolinians place on this issue.

In 2006, the North Carolina General Assembly established the Joint Legislative Commission on Land and Water Conservation to evaluate and recommend funding sources for acquiring public land for conservation purposes. The commission reported its recommendations in 2007 including providing an additional \$1 billion over five years for land and water conservation to be allocated through the existing conservation trust funds.

Recent Successes

Conservation Trust Funds

North Carolina has established three conservation trust funds to address the need to protect land and water resources in the state; the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF), the Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF), and Natural Heritage Trust Fund (NHTF). The three funds work cooperatively to identify and protect areas that contain significant natural communities and other high priority conservation needs.

Parks and Recreation Trust Fund - PARTF is the state's principal funding source for state parks as well as local parks and recreation projects. Established in 1994, PARTF is supported primarily by the state's tax on real estate transfers. The revenue is split between three purposes with 65 percent for state park land acquisition and capital improvements, 30 percent for matching grants to local governments, and 5 percent for beach access. In its 12-year history, PARTF has provided over \$250 million for the state parks system, over \$120 million for local park projects and over \$20 million for beach access. Local governments have provided over \$200 million in matching funds for the local projects.

Clean Water Management Trust Fund - CWMTF was created in 1996 to help local governments, state agencies, and non-profit organizations to protect and restore surface water quality. Over 1,100 grants totaling more than \$832 million have been awarded. Those funds have been matched by \$1.4 billion by the project sponsors. The majority of the funding has been used to conserve buffer zones to protect the state's waterways.

Natural Heritage Trust Fund - NHTF, established in 1987, provides funding to four state agencies for the acquisition and protection of important natural areas, to preserve the state's ecological diversity and cultural heritage, and to inventory the natural heritage of the state. Since its creation, the fund has contributed more than \$265 million through 446 grants to support the conservation of over a quarter million acres.

Progress Toward Conserving Million Acres by 2010

In 2000, North Carolina's governor and General Assembly set a goal to conserve one million acres in a decade. Through June 2008, nearly 600,000 acres have been acquired by public and private organizations.

North Carolina Million Acres Effort Status as of June 2008		
Type of Agency	Examples of Land Conserved	Acres
State Agencies	State parks, state forests, gamelands, wetlands mitigation, coastal reserves, state nature preserves, historic sites	328,617
Local Governments	Parklands, greenways, watershed protection, etc.	27,474
Federal Agencies	National wildlife refuges, National Forests, National Parks, Wetland Reserves	45,115
Local Land Trusts	Protected Lands	133,408
Other Conservation Groups	Nature preserves, waterfowl habitat, historic preservation	50,070
	Total	589,685

New State Parks for a New Century

Through its New Parks for a New Century initiative, the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation has identified sites in the state - among some of the most treasured and threatened of natural resources - as potential additions to the state parks system. This list of sites has been regularly updated through a formal planning process. Important examples of the state's natural diversity are examined using scientific criteria as well as by rating their suitability for recreation. Several new state parks and state natural areas have been added to the state parks system as a result. These include: Chimney Rock, Grandfather Mountain, Mayo River, and Haw River state parks and Bear Paw State Natural Area.

Chimney Rock State Park

Governor Mike Easley announced May 21, 2007 that the state of North Carolina closed on the \$24 million purchase, adding the natural attraction in Rutherford County to the new state park under development in the Hickory Nut Gorge. The 2007 General Assembly authorized naming the new park Chimney Rock State Park. It is traditional for North Carolina state parks to be named after a dominant natural feature, and the acquisition made the name change practical.

"Chimney Rock is a cherished landmark in North Carolina, and this represents a landmark acquisition for the state parks system and the cause of conservation in our state," Easley said. "The state is honored to accept the stewardship of this important natural resource." The gorge has been considered a premier state park site in the system's New Parks for a New Century initiative, which examined areas throughout the state as potential state parks or state natural areas and found the gorge to be a significant center of biodiversity and natural heritage.

Grandfather Mountain

The state of North Carolina has agreed to purchase Grandfather Mountain, one of the state's premier signature landmarks, in Avery County. The agreement includes the 2,601-acre undeveloped portion of the tourist destination as well as a conservation easement on the remaining 604 acres that will be managed through a nonprofit entity by the heirs of Hugh Morton. "Today Grandfather Mountain and all its scenic beauty becomes a state park, which is one more step in our efforts to be One North Carolina Naturally," said Easley. "This is an extremely important habitat and we will take good care of it. The dreams of many North Carolinians and Hugh Morton will be met: North Carolina will protect and preserve Grandfather Mountain forever."

The N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation will manage the undeveloped portion of Grandfather Mountain, including its 11 trails, as a state park. Grandfather Mountain has been a wildlife sanctuary and nature preserve for decades, boasting 16 distinct habitats and 73 rare species including the Carolina northern flying squirrel and the Blue Ridge goldenrod. The mountain contains the headwaters of both the Linville and Watauga Rivers and has been the only private park designated by the United Nations as an International Biosphere Reserve.

Future Challenges

Rapid Loss of Open Space

The Environment North Carolina Research and Policy Center estimates that in the past two decades, the state has lost 2.4 million acres of cropland and forest land; nearly 20 percent of its cropland and 7 percent of its forest land. The estimates are based on an analysis of reports by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. All told, in the last 20 years, development land area has increased by 1.86 million acres, an area greater than the size of the Triangle area (Orange, Durham, Wake, and Johnston counties). Although development has been greatest in the metropolitan areas of the state's largest cities (1.27 million acres), rural counties experienced an increase of 588,000 acres.

Unmet Needs

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources has been tracking progress toward the state's goal of conserving one million acres during the current decade 2001 – 2010. While significant progress has been made toward the goal, the current pace of conserving land is not adequate. As of June 2008, nearly 600,000 acres have been conserved and more than 400,000 acres will need to be conserved within the remaining two years.

In the state parks system alone, it will cost an estimated \$176 million to purchase the 43,752 acres needed to complete all of the current state park units per the park master plans. Through its "New Parks for a New Century" initiative, the Division of Parks and Recreation has identified over 40 sites across the state that could be added as potential state park units. These areas are some of the most treasured and threatened natural resources in North Carolina and have been identified as high- priority acquisitions to the state parks system. Purchasing these new units would require an estimated \$454 million to acquire 113,625 acres.

Reduced Federal Role

The federal role for land and water conservation in North Carolina is not as significant as it has been historically. While the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service manage some of the most outstanding natural resources in the state, only 40,000 acres acquired by federal agencies since 1999. By comparison, nearly 500,000 acres have been conserved by state, local, and private, non-profit conservation organizations. During the past decade, the Land and Water Conservation Fund as averaged about \$1.5 million annually for state and local projects. If LWCF was fully funded, North Carolina would receive about \$10 million per year.

Issue: Improved Outdoor Recreation Resources

Improved outdoor recreation resources and services provide many benefits to communities across North Carolina. Parks and community centers often serve as the focal points of events and activities that bring people together and create a sense of community. In addition, studies have shown that citizens who have access to parks and greenways are more likely to have an active lifestyle. While North Carolina's system of public, private and non-profit parks have been nationally recognized, the rapidly increasing state population creates challenges to maintain services across the board. At the same time, research shows that people who lead an active lifestyle are healthier, exhibit increased productivity on the job, and reduce health care costs to government and industry alike. For these reasons, citizens and communities are seeking to improve the quantity and quality of recreation resources available to them. Local communities play the most important role in providing outdoor recreation facilities and services since most recreation occurs close to home.

Recent Successes

Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Grant Program for Local Governments

The Parks and Recreation Trust Fund has provided more than \$121 million, through 586 grants to local governments for parks and recreation projects, including such amenities as community centers, athletic fields, greenways, playgrounds and green space totaling more than 4,300 acres. Local matching funds in the amount of \$213 million have been leveraged by PARTF grants. PARTF grants have been awarded to 321 local governments in 99 of the state's 100 counties, to urban areas, small towns and rural counties. Since the program began, local governments have requested more than \$200 million. The maximum single grant amount is \$500,000.

What have these grants purchased? The answer is as varied as the communities that have applied. One of the strengths of the PARTF grant program is that local governments decide how the funds can best be used at the grass roots level. PARTF's evaluation process emphasizes local planning and public involvement to foster high quality projects that address local needs. As a result, PARTF has funded a wide array of projects, including open space acquisitions, ballfields, all types of trails, swimming pools, picnic areas and playgrounds. PARTF grants have enhanced public recreation in North Carolina by adding land and facilities including:

4,300 acres acquired	71 concession building	157 restrooms
31 amphitheaters	34 disc golf courses	133 soccer fields
209 ball fields	24 fitness trails	10 swimming pools
85 basketball courts	51 multi-purpose fields	101 tennis courts
41 boat ramps/ docks	327 picnic shelters	232 trail projects
40 community centers	207 playgrounds	88 volleyball courts

Bond Referendums Approved by Local Governments

Many local governments in North Carolina have provided additional recreational facilities and/ or park land by approving bond referendums. In most cases, strong support for using public funds for parks and open space has been evidenced by wide majorities of the voters approving the measures.

Table 1-1. Recent Bond Referendums Approved by Local Governments

Recent Park and Recreation Bonds Approved by Local Governments		
Local Government	Year	Funds Approved (Millions)
City of Clayton	2008	\$3,000,000
City of Greensboro	2008	\$20,000,000
Guilford County	2008	\$20,200,000
Mecklenburg County	2008	\$250,000,000
Person County	2008	\$6,000,000
City of Belmont	2007	\$12,000,000
Town of Fuquay-Varina	2007	\$2,000,000
Johnston County	2007	\$3,700,000
Macon County	2007	\$9,400,000
City of Raleigh	2007	\$88,600,000
Wake County	2007	\$50,000,000
City of Greensboro	2006	\$5,000,000
New Hanover County	2006	\$35,000,000
City of Durham	2005	\$38,333,000
City of Lumberton	2005	\$6,000,000
Town of Mooresville	2005	\$25,000,000
Town of Wake Forest	2005	\$7,000,000
Town of Apex	2004	\$13,000,000
Guilford County	2004	\$20,000,000
City of High Point	2004	\$8,000,000
Mecklenburg County	2004	\$69,000,000
Town of Morrisville	2004	\$4,000,000
Wake County	2004	\$26,000,000
		\$721,233,000

Regional Trail Efforts

Long distance trails provide opportunities for some of the most popular recreation activities in North Carolina as well as corridors for non-motorized transportation, wildlife, and interconnecting larger open areas. The City of Raleigh's greenway system is a nationally-recognized effort that is branching out to surrounding cities and counties. The American Tobacco Trail connects the City of Durham with Jordan Lake through the cooperation of Durham, Chatham and Wake counties. The Carolina Tread Trail is a 15-county regional network of trails and greenways that is designed to link communities and attractions in North and South Carolina. The Mountains-To-Sea State Trail, an effort to link by trail Clingman's Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the outer banks, is the flagship project of the NC State Trails System. Today, over 450 miles of the 1,000 mile route are open for use. Partners across North Carolina are planning and building the trail to link communities together and to serve as the backbone for a growing system of land and water trails.

Future Challenges

Increased Participation

The National Survey on Recreation and the Environment results for North Carolina indicate that participation in recreational activities is increasing rapidly. Not only has North Carolina population increase been among the largest in the nation, but participation rates have gone up as well. Trend information from the survey shows that number of participants in the following group of recreational activities has increased by nearly 50 percent, from 27.4 million of 40.5 million participants, in the past decade.

Table 1-2. North Carolina Resident Participation and Percent Change by Activity

Activity Type	Percent participating 1995	Millions of participants 1995	Percent participating 2006	Millions of participants 2006	Percent change in # participants 1995-2006
Trail/street/road activities	66.1	3.713	85.7	5.812	56.5
Individual sports	20.2	1.137	28.2	1.913	68.2
Team sports	26.5	1.490	21.6	1.468	-1.5
Spectator activities	56.1	3.152	62.4	4.232	34.3
Viewing/learning activities	68.8	3.865	81.7	5.543	43.4
Snow/ice activities	11.8	0.662	17.9	1.212	83.1
Camping	21.8	1.226	28.7	1.949	59.0
Hunting	9.4	0.528	9.9	0.670	26.9

Activity Type	Percent participating 1995	Millions of participants 1995	Percent participating 2006	Millions of participants 2006	Percent change in # participants 1995-2006
Fishing	26.7	1.500	36.7	2.493	66.2
Boating	28.7	1.612	31.0	2.105	30.6
Swimming (natural, pool, snorkeling)	50.8	2.856	53.1	3.605	26.2
Outdoor adventure activities	33.0	1.853	51.2	3.475	87.5
Social activities	67.8	3.811	88.2	5.986	57.1
Total		27.4		40.5	

To help address the need for increasing participation, local governments are planning to increase the recreational facilities and parks available to their residents. The Municipal and County Park and Recreation Services Survey conducted by the Recreation Resource Service at N.C. State University has an estimate of future local needs. The 2006-07 report asked recreation departments to report their capital improvement needs for the next 10 years. The 105 departments responded that they have these plans and the capital improvement needs (land and capital) totaled more than \$230 million, with land acquisition needs of more than 22,000 acres. The survey was sent to 219 local recreation departments, so the estimates are quite conservative; reflecting about half of the departments in the state.

The Division of Parks and Recreation continues to address a lengthy backlog of construction and renovation projects in the state parks system. Approximately \$335 million is required to meet all of the needs for new construction and renovation for existing state parks. Not included in this estimate are the construction and renovation needs for newly established state park units, such as Chimney Rock, Haw River and Mayo River state parks.

Issue: Enhancing Quality of Life and Economic Growth

Land and water conservation play a key role in fostering economic growth and job creation in the State. Many of the State's largest economic sectors are dependent upon the maintenance of a sound and healthy environment. The agricultural and forestry industries are affected greatly by land conservation since their products are grown on that land. Tourism in the State is greatly dependent on the preservation of the State's outstanding natural and cultural resources. Military bases depend on having easy access to large parcels of open land. In addition, many economic sectors that are not dependent directly on the conservation of land for success still value a diverse and healthy environment because of the quality of life benefits it provides to employees.

Recent Successes

Economic Impact of North Carolina State Parks

North Carolina's state parks system provides important benefits to visitors to the state as well as local residents in the form of conservation, outdoor recreation activities and educational opportunities. In addition to those benefits, state parks and their facilities, services and amenities contribute economically to local communities and the state through tourism expenditures. In 2005 and 2006, N.C. State University interviewed park visitors to gather information about their expenditures while visiting the parks. Analysis of data collected in the study reveals that the state parks make a considerable economic contribution to North Carolina's economy. Each park contributes a number of jobs and has considerable impact on the personal income of local residents. The principal results of the study are highlighted below.

- Each tourist (primary-purpose, non-local visitor) spent an average of \$23.56 per day. The average group size was 3.14, and the average length of visit in the area was 1.73 days. Thus, average group spending per park visit was \$127.98.
- The overall estimated annual economic impact of tourist expenditures for all 14 study parks, based on 2004 attendance, was:
 - \$124 million in sales;
 - \$46 million impact on residents' income;
 - 2,119.9 full-time equivalent jobs.
- The overall estimated annual impact of the annual operating budgets of the 14 parks was:
 - \$15 million in sales;
 - \$10 million impact on residents' income;
 - 256.9 full-time equivalent jobs.
- To estimate the potential annual economic impact of all tourist visiting the North Carolina State Parks System, the data from the 14 study units was applied to the entire system. It was assumed that the travel and spending patterns of the tourist to the remaining sites were comparable to the tourist visiting the study units.
 - \$289 million in sales;
 - \$120 million on residents' income;
 - 4,924 full-time equivalent jobs.

Travel and Tourism's Economic Impact

According to the N.C. Department of Commerce, tourism remains one of North Carolina's most vital industries. The economic activity and employment generated by tourism spans various economic sectors. Annually, visitors to North Carolina spend over \$16 billion, generating over 190,000 jobs for North Carolinians. State and local tax revenues, as a result of the visitor spending, total more than \$1.3 billion. Research about tourism in the state indicates that outdoor recreational activities are among the popular for visitors.

Table 1-3. Popular Activities for Visitors to North Carolina

Visitor Activities in North Carolina - 2007					
Visiting relatives/Family Reunion	36.1%	Historic sites/churches	6.5%	Gardens	3.2%
Shopping	19.2%	Museums	5.0%	Nature travel/ ecotouring	2.7%
Visiting friends	19.2%	Wildlife viewing	5.0%	Art galleries	2.5%
Rural sightseeing	14.0%	Fishing (fresh or saltwater)	4.7%	Wine tasting/winery tour	2.5%
Beach	13.0%	Nightclub/dancing	4.7%	Casino/gaming	2.4%
Fine dining	13.0%	Old homes/mansions	3.9%	Golf	2.4%
State/National Park	8.7%	Special events/Festivals	3.9%	Camping	2.3%
Urban sightseeing	6.9%	Hiking/backpacking	3.5%	Youth/amateur/collegiate sporting events	2.3%

Source: NC Department of Commerce

Future Challenges

Regional Differences in the Need for Recreation Resources

Communities across North Carolina are experiencing very different challenges in the 21st century. Metropolitan areas, particularly along the Piedmont crescent, are growing rapidly as more people move into the area, drawn by the good jobs, good schools and colleges, mild climate and an abundance of recreational opportunities. The increased growth is causing open space to disappear and prices for land to escalate. Conversely, many other regions in the state have suffered job losses as traditional industries move away. These areas face slowing economies, tighter local budgets, and generally fewer resources to meet the needs of their residents. Park and recreation resources can help attract tourists and replace lost jobs.